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Morality and Family in the winter's Tale – A Review

Abstract: In the last romances, no matter how the names of the characters change, or the setting shifts from Tyre to ancient Britain to Sicily to a desert island, Shakespeare almost writes a single play with an exploration of its different probabilities. The present paper tries to explore Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1623) from a moral and familial perspective.

Keywords: Leontes, the ruler, the family man, paternity, morality, Shakespeare.

Like *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale* is compressed and simplified. Four scenes alone – of jealousy, of judgment, of feasting and of repentance – fill three-fifths of the play. The sprawling stories of *Pericles* and *Cymbeline* give way to a piece concentrated on two equal movements; and the tighter organization here compels

Father Time to apologize for the lapse of a decade or two between halves, a lapse which in other plays Shakespeare takes as a matter hardly worth commenting. Its dramatic economy is noteworthy with the first part introducing Leontes' jealousy without delay and sets it against purity, loyalty, and integrity of Hermione. After a little transitional scene in which the new helpless life of Perdita is protected even in the middle of a world of storms and man-eating bears, a second part is devoted to the healing by time and the light-hearted laughter of an innocent world. The stage is set for the discoveries and forgiveness of the fifth act, and throughout, the telling scenes are set off by shorter scenes that afford breathing spells.

This structural integration is further enforced by the arrangement of the thematical, theatrical and moral patterns in the play. The jealousy of Leontes is comparable to Othello's and even less justifiable. It strikes him suddenly and inexplicably, like a pestilence, and "infection" is Shakespeare's keyword in describing it. The various disease metaphors scattered in the play highlight the same. Hermione is chaste and virtuous and everyone in the play but Leontes knows and proclaims her innocence. Leontes poisons himself; he and his counselors reverse the role of Othello and Iago.

Leontes seems to struggle between his two roles as a ruler and a family man. The continuity of the family relationship, by which the father is fulfilled in his child, is one of the foundations on which the symbolic structure of the play rests. It is, therefore, proper that the disruption of Leontes' integrity takes the shape of a doubt over Mamillius' parentage – a necessary sequel to his embittered reflections on Hermione's purity. "Art thou my boy?" is the question which indicates his unnatural moral state.

The nature and extent of Leontes' infirmity, his degeneration to incoherence is expressed with a power that is not, indeed, to be judged in terms of the realistic drama of the 1930's & 40's – but which is none the less intensely vivid. As he loses his ethical and moral compass, Leontes moves from the periphery into the center of the action and becomes not only a marginal figure of foreboding but the prime mover in a descent into disaster.

In the figure of Hermione, Shakespeare explores the concept of family unity from a feminine perspective. The paterfamilias is disturbed and oppressive – the figure of the mother is oppressed and subjugated, but nonetheless, consoling and regenerative. Contrasted to the immoral Leontes, Hermione is conceived as a gracious symbol and “Grace” is an important word in Shakespeare's later plays. Macbeth uses it to deliberate effect; it is associated with the sanctity and healing powers of Edward the Confessor, and Malcolm is revealed in his actions as an instrument of “the grace of Graces”. In *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare seems to reinforce the Christian associations already acquired in *Macbeth* with a deep personal intuition of natural fertility, fulfilled in the intimate world of the family. Shakespeare presents the impasse by exploring the part played by “blood” in human experience – a part at once destructive and potentially maturing – into a relation with feelings which imply the understanding of a positive spiritual connection. If Leontes' behavior leads to the reversal of that conception, and the unity which derives from it, the perfection while he has repudiated stands out, firmly unshakable as a point of reference by which the surrounding action may be judged, in the constancy of his wife. Hermione's earliest appearance is deliberately surrounded with religious associations and intimations of value. Polixenes addresses her during this opening exchange as “most sacred lady”, and

backs the apostrophe with a further reference to “your precious self.” Infidelity to family bond lies the key to the full harmonious development of the individual’s spiritual faculties. And of that fidelity, the “gracious” queenliness of Hermione is the proper object. She replies to Leontes’ slighted foreboding in “crabbed” & “sour” decisively “‘Tis Grace indeed!” In this unequivocal assertion of spiritual values, set against the disease and disintegration caused by her husband’s suspicious, lies the key to Hermione’s moral significance in the play. The full value of her assertion, however, is apparent until it has been worked out dramatically speaking, in terms of Hermione’s relationship to Leontes’ & her child. In his insults, Leontes stresses brutally the fact that his wife is with a child.

“Let her sport herself/ with that, she’s big with; for
This Polixenes/ has made her swell thus.”

His words re-echo, in the form of perverted brutality, the conversation between Hermione’s ladies at the beginning of the scene, words which give a rich natural quality to her state. The “rounding” of the queen is here envisaged as a part of a natural, beneficent process, “goodly” and destined, “in good time”, to find its proper fulfillment in maternity. The unsoftened harshness of Leontes’ use of “big” and “swell”, with their implication of the grotesque and the deformed, appear in the light of this contrast, as a deliberate inversion of nature which will produce its own fruit in the disruption of normal human relationships. That disruption, indeed, follows logically from the nature of Leontes’ sin, already indicated and now bearing fruit in action. His is more than a personal offense; it

is against “nature”, and so against “grace” for which Hermione in her simplicity stands.

As a necessary outcome of Leontes’ sin, Hermione Leontes to Polixenes has been rudely breaking, the young Prince Mamillius has died out of the course of nature and the winter of the god’s displeasure has rested upon them all.

Hermione’s child is, like her mother, a “prisoner” but only to “the womb”. She is therefore essentially free delivered by “great nature” from whatever stain of original imperfection may have burned in the passions of her parents – from which – real or imagined – she is entirely separated. Upon this conception, the whole of Perdita’s reconciliatory function in the play is based eventually. The Shepherd’s pregnant observation – “thou mettest with things dying, I with things newborn” scarcely needs the parallel from Pericles. “did you not name a tempest/ A birth, and death?” (v.vii) – to give it a point. The implication of the two phrases is essentially the same. Out of storm and tempest, themselves connected in a symbolic scheme with the results of human folly, is born a new life, which is destined to grow in the course of time into the harmony of “grace” and to lead to final reconciliation: From this moment, Hermione’s child is connected with the general theme of “grace” and fertility born out of passion and jealousy. Shakespeare deliberately juxtaposes the pastoral with mainstream royal culture to bring out the contradictory moral responses to ethical conflicts and fuses the two in the figure of Florizel.

In the great pastoral scene (iv. iv), the theme of spring: of life reborn but not yet come to full maturity is stressed at first. It is explicit in Florizel’s apostrophe to Perdita as – “...no Shepherdess, but Flora/ Peering in April’s front.”

If this stood alone, the pastoral decorative element might still be held to prevail, producing an effect of delicate make-believe. This could then be regarded as implicit in the following comparison of the sheep-shearing to a “meeting of the petty gods.” Of the this “meeting” Perdita, dressed out in the naive finery her father has produced for her, would be the “queen”. Perdita’s replies, however, both here and in the dialogues that follow, indicate that the true situation is more intricate. Behind the pastoral idyll lies the real world, with differences in the social station that she is throughout entirely conscious. She labels Florizel’s poetic expressions as “extreme” beneath which lies the fact that he has obscured his “high self” as “the gracious mark O’ the land” at the same time she has been raised to the imitation indeed of a goddess but in no sense endowed with any corresponding reality.

The introduction by Perdita of the vital conception of “grace” now clearly associated with rank and courtliness, reminds us that it is no part of the purpose of the play to set up pastoral simplicity as a final, self-sufficient ideal. It is at best associated with Spring, an intermediate state which has much to offer to the courtly order. But it would need before the play is completed to be assimilated into that order if the effect to be achieved is more than a pathetic illusion. Neither of the lovers, indeed, is destined to find fulfillment within the pastoral order.

Paternity, in Shakespeare’s last plays, is the keystone of the family pattern, and no marriage can be held complete which does not request, and receive the father’s blessing. When Florizel replies emphatically “He neither does nor shall” he is, in fact, expressing readiness to accept a relationship essentially incomplete,

and so incapable of achieving full consummation. The situation here is in contrast to *The Tempest* where Ferdinand & Miranda are blessed by the towering figure of Prospero. The spirit in which Polixenes develops his protest, now ever, places the situation in a new light. That a father “Is at the nuptials of his son a guest/ That best becomes a table.” Is beyond question; but the peculiar bitterness with which this father stresses his anger, his sense of exclusion, introduces a new element into the situation. “Is not, your father grown incapable? .../ ... is he not stupid/ With age and altering rheums? Can he speak, hear?” We need not go so far as to suppose that, in thus invoking in ironic terms a hypothetical old age, Polixenes is describing his own state. His intervention is an exact complement to Leontes’ earlier sin and it brings into the pastoral action the winter of lust and sin, springing from the vanity and barrenness of jealousy, impotent age, in contrast: to the summer of youth.

Paulina and Camillo act as two moral scales placed in Sicily and Bohemia against which the moral actions of the play is judged. Paulina’s individual loss (her husband’s death), mirrors in a reduced scale Hermione’s predicament. After Shakespeare has achieved the restoration of the principal crisis, he rounds off by fusing the two, as Leontes gives her to marriage to Camillo.

If Paulina and Camillo are two fixed moral indexes, planted at the two geographical poles (Sicily & Bohemia) of the play, Autolycus is ideally a floating signifier in this medley of moral aberrations. Himself a combination of the classical figures of the Eiron and Bomolochus; he enters the scene with his ballads, which add to the note of pastoral innocence, a spirit of wayward

humanity. The comic-pastoral exchanges that he has with the Clown, the shepherd and others balance the rarified idealism, our prime concern, with a more human note – and in particular with a direct evocation of the “flesh”. Autolycus’ ballad songs, with such references as “against the hard heart of maids” and again “... it was thought she was a woman, and was turned into a cold fish for sky would not exchange flesh with one that loved her –“ reminds us the spirit of certain exchanges in *The Tempest* between Stephano and Trinculo. The “flesh” still has its claims in this remote world of pastoral and youthful nostalgia; claims perhaps not felt with sufficient intensity to be placed in the foreground, or to be developed with full conviction, but necessary to the complete effect.

In Autolycus himself, of course, the outpouring of spontaneous life moves on the margin of social reforms. It has a predatory aspect comically expressed in his first action, the picking of the clown’s pocket. This act is a devaluation of his victim’s newfound riches and the social pretentious which these have roused in him. It represents an element which will have to be related in due course, as far as it may be, to the growing harmony. For the new and natural life expressed in the resurrection of spring is to be, once assumed into fully “gracious” forms of living, a prelude to the final reconciliation. The primary significance of the pastoral which follows lies in its relation to the birth of “Spring” out of “Winter”, and life – even in the form of way word, anarchic impulses – on the margin of social reforms and conventions. The criticism of social forms and its manipulations by Autolycus has its place in Shakespeare’s handling of the pastoral. His assumption of a courtly disguise (“receives not thy nose court-odor from me? Reflect I not on thy baseness court-contempt?”) Conveys his criticism.

The shepherd and the down respond with a characteristic mixture of naivety and their own reading, simply and un-disguisedly cynical, on the way of the world. “Though authority is a stubborn bear, yet he is of tided by the nose with gold.” Though this observation is not in tune with the “gracious” conclusion to which the play moves, it does in part corroborate Autolycus’ own attitude. Therefore, it is one more device in a consistent attempt to give life to the pastoral convention, to make it acceptable as a reflection, symbolical yet true to experience, of the variety of human motives and feelings.

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